Don't Be an Airhead

photo modified

By Lt. Jennifer Stillings

Remember those aviation-indoctrination days? We gathered in the hypobaric-chamber building and received the boring physiology briefs, while we tried to stay caffeinated and alert. We heard about fatigue, the effects of alcohol, and the hook maneuver—yada, yada, yada. Then we lined up for the chamber, and each person was assigned a different task. The chamber pressure climbed to 25,000 feet. We laughed as classmates screwed up patty-cake and made clowns of themselves.

No one laughed, though, about an incident that happened on deployment. We had been gone almost four months, changing theaters between Afghanistan and the Arabian Gulf—never getting too mission complacent but plenty aviation complacent. We were pros; we had done it all. Right?

I was setting up my backseat, electronic-countermeasures system and troubleshooting last-minute items. My crew and I had our oxygen masks off, but we planned to put them back on

when we got off the tanker.

Suddenly, I didn't feel quite right. It's hard to explain how I felt, but I moved a little more slowly than usual and had trouble focusing. I then looked at the cabin-pressure gauge.

In the EA-6B, that's one of the few repeater gauges in the backseat. It's also more difficult for the pilot to read because the panel is in front of the stick base. The cabin pressure read 15,000 feet. The usual reading at our operating altitude was 9,000 to 10,000 feet. As I reached for my oxygen mask, everything dimmed to gray. After I got the first couple breaths of oxygen, everything again became clear. I alerted everyone in the cockpit of our situation, and they also got on oxygen.

With four sets of eyes in the cockpit, it's amazing no one spotted our slow pressure leak on the gauge before we felt it. We're lucky I'm an altitude lightweight, because most of the crew didn't notice a problem until they, too, went on oxygen.

However, this incident should serve as a reminder that a repeater gauge exists for a reason. Any member of the crew may recognize a problem. Mission degradation can be costly but not nearly as costly as losing a jet and crew.

Lt. Stillings flies with VAQ-139.

OPNAV 3710.7S (Tactical and Tactical Jet Training Aircraft), paragraph 8.2.4.3, states, "Oxygen shall be used by all occupants from takeoff to landing. Emergency bailout bottles when provided, shall be connected prior to takeoff."—Ed.

Mishap-Free Milestones

VP-92	25 years	79,000 hours
HS-10	10 years	52,200 hours
HMH-362	20 years	60,000 hours
VMA-223	12 years	50,000 hours
HS-7	5 years	15,000 hours